

# The reaction to boris johnson's article about ken bigley and resulting implicatio...

[Media](#)



When Boris Johnson's article in *The Spectator*<sup>1</sup> caused controversy a week ago, it raised questions not only about the ethical position of politicians involved in journalism, but also about the freedom of the media and its relationship with regulators and governmental bodies. Boris Johnson is a much-derided figure, often attacked for his looks and manner rather than his views and actions. In a radio interview for the BBC, for example, Paul Bigley (Ken's brother) accused him of being a "self-centred, pompous twit"<sup>2</sup> and belittled him for his appearance and waffling manner despite the valid points in the article, and subsequent apology.

This tact was followed by newspapers almost without exception; *The Times*, for example, started their article with a quote from Michael Howard denouncing Johnson's writing as "nonsense from beginning to end,"<sup>4</sup> a comment in the *Liverpool Daily Post* recommended that he 'got life insurance,'<sup>5</sup> and an article on the BBC website<sup>6</sup> provided quotations only from those against the MP. This is in direct contrast to what the same website suggested was the general public opinion.

On the 'Your Views'<sup>7</sup> section, nineteen out of twenty-two comments support Johnson's opinion, ranging from those in general support to people from Liverpool criticising their fellow Liverpudlians; suggesting that the media was either being sensationalist or deliberately opposing a Conservative- who, it should be noted, did not even write the article. The true author, Simon Heffer, was barely mentioned and has 'no plans to issue an apology';<sup>8</sup> further evidence that it was the character of Johnson rather than his article that caused so much disagreement.

This is supported by a comment in The Independent which noted that Johnson was not the first social commentator to challenge Liverpool's reaction to the beheading. On Sunday the 10th of October, Dr Anthony Daniels challenged the town's reaction for an 'estranged son " whose attachment to Liverpool was so great that he was planning to live in Thailand. "'9 Dr Daniels, however, was not featured in any newspaper or criticised for his comments. This calls into question the role of MPs in the media; whether it is possible for them to be both decision makers and public commentators.

Though not the first editor to become an MP- Iain Macleod and Dick Crossman have both managed it in the past- as both the Financial Times and The Guardian Student pointed out, in 'bowing down to Mr Howard's edict'<sup>10</sup> Johnson put political ambition over journalistic independence. This not only undermines Johnson's validity as a public commentator but also the doctrine of press freedom. Enshrined in the US Constitution in the First Amendment and by 'Supreme Court precedent,'<sup>11</sup> the press is often perceived in America as the 'fourth branch of government,' providing a check and balance to the judiciary, executive and legislative.

Though in Britain the branches are less divided, the same principle should stand to provide effective restraints; hence the ongoing debate over the Lord Chancellor's position in all three branches of Government. When an MP becomes involved in the media, therefore, its independence is called into question. It seems unlikely, for example, than an MP could comment fairly on the actions of a body he or she works for. The reaction to Johnson's article

proves that MPs working as journalists do not have the same freedom as journalists not also working as MPs.

This challenges the validity of a 'free media' that can be influenced so easily despite supposedly having complete freedom of speech. Often heralded as an indicator of democracy, Britain's press is perceived to be one of the freest in the world. "Freedom," however, can be interpreted in many ways. In the United Kingdom, for example, though the media can in theory print anything there are moral and bureaucratic restrictions. Seven companies, four of which account for 90% of sales, own the entire national press and media 'moguls' such as Rupert Murdoch control many publications.

Murdoch himself owns the News of the World, The Sun, The Times and The Sunday Times. This may have influenced their synonymous attack on Johnson's article which was published in The Spectator, owned by one of Murdoch's rivals the Barclay brothers- who, as commented upon in The Times, have 'not raised the Liverpool editorial'<sup>12</sup> with Johnson, revealing their ongoing faith in having a politician as an editor whilst others are questioning it. The ownership of chains of newspapers has implications on their bias and impartiality.

Murdoch's politics, for example, are generally right- wing, though he apparently favours republicanism over monarchy and is said to have refused a British peerage. His influence is apparent in the papers he owns. In February 1998, for example, The Sun, which had consistently attacked Labour's plans for the Millennium Dome suddenly changed tack and threw its weight behind the project. It seems no coincidence that Murdoch's BSkyB

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had recently made an investment in the Dome. <sup>13</sup> It is, however, impossible for any form of media to be truly unbiased.

Humans, by their nature, are influenced by what they read and who they see, and inject personal opinion into articles or reports without intending to. In the United Kingdom The Times is typically seen as a left- wing paper, The Telegraph as right- wing, and The Independent as the most unbiased paper. These stereotypes rarely hold true, however, with The Times' editorial often being more lenient towards the Conservatives. This may have more to do with the fact that the media often opposes whoever is in power, whoever they are, with no regards to traditional stance.

Of the articles about Johnson, the most balanced viewpoint was from The Guardian Student. From the very start it offers views for and against the article; even the headline, " Boris is 'sorry' for tactless own goal" <sup>14</sup> presents Johnson as apologetic whilst also implying he made a blunder. Throughout, it keeps this balanced viewpoint with quotations from those supporting him followed by those against; contrasting articles in The Times<sup>15</sup> which present tirades of criticism. The Guardian Student article is an exception, however.

Though often not as transparent as headlines in tabloids such as The Sun or The Daily Star, broadsheets in the Western world show clear bias without obvious governmental controls. This may be seen to affect politics. In a poll conducted in America in 1992, for example, 89% of 1400 members of the national media surveyed voted for Clinton in that same year. <sup>16</sup> Though it is certain this would have influenced the journalists' articles, it is debateable whether the media dictated the public's mood or vice versa.

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In 1997 when The Sun declared " It's The Sun Wot Won It" due to its support of the Labour party, it was questionable whether they actually influenced the public or merely responded to what the public was urging them to print.

Despite the obvious bias, however, the media of the Western world is still typically liberal in viewpoint, with it rare for an outlet to present controversial or minority views. The views of the BNP, for example, are rarely, if ever, supported in the media. The reason for this comes down to money.

The public are unlikely to buy a paper if it is known to publish racist, xenophobic or controversial views, even if they are just the expression of free speech (though The Sun comes close on occasion, printing sensationalist headlines with unsubstantiated evidence<sup>17</sup>). Constantly looking for ways to increase revenue, papers are therefore unlikely to publish minority views if it is the majority that they are aiming for. Minority views are more often only heard when their exponents, such as Abu Hanzar, are being persecuted or when comedians are chastising them.

Billy Connelly and Doug Stanhope, for example, as criticised in the Warwick Boar<sup>18</sup>, regularly use controversial, politically incorrect material under the guise of jokes. Connelly joking about Ken Bigley, for example, did not receive the criticism that Johnson did despite being more tactless and insensitive. Freedom of press, however, is not truly understood unless compared to non-Western countries. In 'Last Seven Days' (a Warwick- based informal political discussion group), for example, both a Russian and a Chinese student commented that the freedom of the press is not appreciated in Britain.

In Russia, using restrictive legislation and exerting financial pressure through the government and government-related companies, the Kremlin "gained nearly total control of the broadcast media in 2003." 19 Many Russians, as commented upon in the World Press Review, support restrictions on the press. 20 This has resulted in a media consistently supporting the Russian government and President, as evident in the translation of articles from Moscow News which celebrate nuclear weapons test launches as 'landmark events.'

An article on the same event in the USA or the UK is likely to have included criticism of the demand and use of nuclear weapons. The general perception of the media in much of the Western world is that they have a great degree of freedom. Whilst this is true if compared to countries such as Russia, China or Iraq, there are still pressures on journalists to produce articles with a particular slant or viewpoint. It could be said, for example, that the restrictive policies typical of countries ruled by dictatorship have been replaced by the "dictatorial" media barons such as Rupert Murdoch and the Barclay brothers.

The governmental restrictions, meanwhile, are more likely to be whips or party leaders trying to pander to public opinion rather than imposing party policy, as was displayed by Michael Howard over Boris Johnson's article. I also witnessed this during work experience at the House of Commons, where there were daily meetings for all opposition MPs to discuss the previous day's press coverage, and the majority of Theresa May's (MP, Windsor and

Maidenhead) work was to attract the attention of, or respond to, local and national media.

The relationship between the press and politicians is complex, with politicians trying to get in the media, and journalists often only willing to cover a minority of issues for personal, political, or financial reasons. When politicians, such as Boris Johnson, become directly involved in the media, further restrictions and pressures are placed on the medium. Therefore though the media, in particular in Britain, is supposedly free from constraints, in reality there are numerous limits on what journalists are willing to write.